I didn’t even know if the fever
was real or if it was just the relentless
heat of Rome in July.

No air conditioning,
the air still and heavy in the room
that looked out on a courtyard

where someone started hammering at six a.m.
from one of the small, fragile balconies.
Even the marble of the bathtub was warm.

I hated feeling sick, weak,
disappointing the maids who were irritated
because they couldn’t come in to clean the room,

my husband who wanted to see the sights,
the high ceiling holding in the air,
the dense, green geranium wallpaper waiting.

The owl above the bed was real,
its claws grasping its prey,
circles around its eyes,

returning through the jungle in the wallpaper
and finding me there
swimming in the sea among the mare’s-tail.